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These poems examine our dichotomies—fate and possibility, violence and love, faith and disbelief. The speakers in these poems are concerned with the tensions we face when addressing identity, and the consequences we don't always understand. Through changing landscapes and imagery, the collection aims to express how identity is as much reacting against as reacting to the world around us.

THAW

by

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APPROVAL PAGE

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I

Memory as Fever

The untwisting of memory steals
my words,
 but there's no better way

to rid myself of it,
 collapse the past
with the stick and scrape of legs

running without fear.
 Where voices sound
like murmurs in fog,

disembodied but
smoothed over like bronze.
 Because all memories

tighten 'round my ankles,
and it's a lonesome
 fever. Tired and bright.

Give me this one
 extravagance.
This wayward unspooling

of imagination,
 the kind my mother praised
when I was young.

Like my green
bicycle on the porch that lost its edges,
 found its way

to the bay's surf,
 spokes stalled and begging
to swim. There's nothing wrong

 here. Here's where
 I learned to save:
stories and fate and havoc,

though eventually I fold under
their hard lean.

So if you find me

pale and slipping,
please don't call for help.
From where you stand—

squirming—
you're already remembering too,
if you see me at all.

Basil

From cutting board to stove to sink,
she moves without a recipe card,

her hands exchanging knife for spoon
as if she can hear the stewing blueberries

melt open,
 warm to dark purple.

My aunt has written letters to me
since I was sent to sleep-away camp,

letters of humble awe
 at the gardens she's cultivated

or the lattice pie crusts
she makes for her prized rhubarb.

She doesn't notice
the lyricism in her handwriting—

 the long bend of her cross strokes,

how she hurries through loops,
as each word sweeps into the next like

 her lemon sugar pavlova, all breath.

Every letter, of place: a park bench,
 a crowded cafe, her back porch.

Moved to exist in a moment, she'd record
the locales I couldn't yet perceive,

and am now often guilty of overlooking.
 Like a bee wriggling loose from the hive—

blindly foraging, distracted and
laboring at chance.

Any small detail unreels me.

As when, last spring,

she offered me a basil leaf neatly
torn from its stalk on her window sill,

she chewed hers as though it were a slice of clementine,
sucking the tops of her fingers, inhaling

the leaf's green brightness.
Peppery? Lemony?

She readjusted the potted plant
toward the sun, reminisced

about her last trip to Bombay, where
she bought *Falooda* off a smiling vendor,

*They mix basil seeds with rose water and milk
to make this chilled drink to fight the heat.*

She hasn't a clue I still can't decide
what the basil tasted like.

She hopes I will steal her story to make my own.

Fetter Me Here

Dark pulse:
the slow, final beat
of the cattle's chests thrum.

Their dwindling murmur looses soft pools of honeyed milk.

This nectar left to clot
the still drawing blood
revarnishes my debris.

Mercy is the bee's soft buzz
that startles the grass.

Its quivering, the sweetness I lack.

The late light thickens—
there is no time for a slow cure.

If I could cast myself a new shape,
offer myself against

these unbreathing beasts,

I would break my neck
into the gnarled oleaster,

laden with bruised fruit. Ever, my branches

bowed with the needless
overripe.

And the harvest hands

that never stop to swat me down.

The Unfinished Slaves

- *L'Accademia*

The statues' strangled motion looks
even more tired in the heat. Their incomplete

limbs—the strangeness of it,
elegiac and crude.

Side-flung like hallmarkers,
their torsos strain away

from the small crowd
funneling past, heads already

bent upward toward *The David*,
independent of his stone.

It's in the translation of abandonment
we cover ourselves, act like ash

when touched—the broken action
each statue stakes, what hides there.

A look of possession so thwarted
you can imagine them asking

for a chisel to fill themselves back in.
This, their small ache.

The details their bodies
are missing: hands,

a neck, a furrowed brow,
most without eyes to see.

It's hard to believe they couldn't hear
a sweat-dampened fist carving

their emergence. A coaxing breath

lending marble its sheen.

The awakening figure—flawed, only
half of what Michelangelo could reveal.

His chisel's slow untrapping,
not enough to lend them gravity:

the final pull of body from stone.

Present Tense

Say infidelity is hereditary:
an impartial heart only ever
capable of half-full love,

then what could I say
to convince myself that
it's inevitability that tracks

me like some dumbstruck
fox, temporarily distracted
by a bird's trail, cut from lace

in the snow. My familiar
victim: You don't blame
me for such deceit—

the quiet awe I fashion
on the roof of your mouth—
my instinct for trauma,

the souvenir I can't help
but leave, because as much
as my desire works against

the unmerciful synapses
of my brain, I count my
losses the same way:

mine, mine, mine.

The Botanist Explains the Commemoration of Flora

- *The Colosseum*, 1855

What better object of un-ruin
than the silent
appeal of the flower? history's witness to
the slitting of throats

an empire's slaughtered
menagerie

take *Arenaria Rubra*—the slender
Alsine wedged beneath
the amphitheater's south-
facing walls purpled blossoms

wooded by the city's sand
& heat
once scattered
debris—

seeds fallen
from the ebony coat
of the long extinct *Auroch* stolen

but more so than lineage

flowers curate movement

how fluctuating shores reenact the ocean's cadence
this ruin's blooms

sow the marks of the absent—

ornaments of misplaced creatures hunted
in the wild then hunted
in a ring a centuries

long celebration of man's

violent intentions so that now
it is not the *venatore*'s bloodied
thrust we triumph

but rather Nature's repossession:
the rigid sepals that protect
new petals where
painstakings emerge

Inheritance

My mother likes the idea of dying
in the middle of something,
dying with items still left

on her to-do list. *Like my mother,*
she says. *I'll die young*
like she did. The permission

an unexpected death
brings. Unreturned phone calls,
donation receipts not yet

alphabetized. What it feels like
to lie in bed next to someone—
that unfelt stir, maybe how

bodies spasm when first falling
asleep. Would my father wake
& shower before noticing?

Mistake the rumpled bedsheets
for a rising chest? And who
would I be amidst this mourning?

Could I know how to comfort
my brother? I don't know if
he could stand to be in the room.

How my mother invited me
to kneel at my grandmother's side,
hold her hand though

she had already receded into coma,
my brother at home with my father.
I wasn't sure where to look,

watching my mother where she
stood at the end of the bed,
learning how to lose

her own mother, and me,
an unknowing participant
of how we memorize grief.

The privilege—tiresome
& stark—of watching.
Except my mother hates

witnesses: photographs &
prayer—both align her
too closely with design.

She'll talk her body to surrender,
polish her choked cough
that already sounds so much

like my grandmother, & wait
for an opportunity to disappear
because this is what she has chosen.

And she asks only that I wait.

Croagh Patrick, Co. Mayo

- 762 meters above sea level

The whitewash chapel breaks the sky's blue.
I turn away from the faithful, some
standing, others kneeling in ancient dirt.

The bay below
pulls my neck down—

buoys my gaze.

Fractured parcels of land crowd the water
like mirror mosaic. I picture crags

loosening over centuries,
pulling themselves from the mountain.



A nameless carpenter
and mason built the mountain's
chapel, lived in a tent
on the peak for six months.
They were trying to revive
the climb, build
eaves around the faceless
voice people sought. The windows
were left shutterless,
without panes of glass.



When I see these weary pilgrims,
I hear hymnals. I count the few
bare feet.

Breathlessness stalks
the summit. Why did they come
this far? None of this feels
like penance. We're all too
merciful with ourselves.

Thick-scented
dirt and bruised palms,

the only tributes my body
 can offer.
And is there anything
 more lonesome than kneeling
in prayer and not knowing what to say?

Fried Peaches

You avoid my question
with the smell of fried peaches:
subtle caramelized citrus,

dredging the barely ripe fruit
in a thin puddle of egg yolk—
I'm only looking for a yes

or no. And I've seen you
do this before: listen, mostly
detached from whatever's being said,

as if your hands actually tangle
you in another task, scramble for
the cornbread mix in its chicory

blue paper sack, cornflour sawdust
spilling on the counter's white ceramic.
If you really wanted to,

you'd tell me you're too busy
or the boiling vegetable oil
requires a close eye, but you

let me hang at your left shoulder,
even though you have no intention
of answering. The secrets

you work so hard
to whisper on the phone—
the suspicion I have—

you find easy
to ignore. I'd rather
give up my words. How,

to touch the slotted ladle in your hand
would be to wrench your wrist
backward, leave your fingers sore.

If I could do it.

That this kitchen—greasy & unswept,
can still somehow smell sweet
even when you're burning the honey.

Light: A Catalog

The moon, when swallowed

whole resembles the dazed
reflection of a flame.

Light, when bent, shows us—
when given over to passing

through another—weightlessness.
Every one of my freckles widens,

warms itself in a pool
of sun crowding the small

divots of my collarbone.
To seek light is to find

dizziness in the horizon's thaw.

II

Mistreating Beauty

The sun won't relent. I'm walking the streets
for cover. If she hears my footsteps,
she makes no effort to see who's approaching,
hands tangled in a trellis of roses,
discarded petals and stems, a pile
beneath her balcony—perhaps too wilted
for her glass vase. I imagine the woman
climbing downstairs to arrange
the dismantled blooms in shade,
her best effort at protecting them
from climbing sun. Her hands
are moving quickly—in and out
of the greenery, with such persuasion,
her hidden fingers could be doing
the cutting, deft and delicate
in their straight lines. She uncrowds
the blooms, stuns them with new air—
a flintspark at night.
But I'm misunderstanding—taking
pruning and cutting for synonyms.
She's not trimming roses
for her vase. Their brief smudges
darken their descent, hang in the air.
She cuts the rose heads
away, watches them fall and erupt
on the sidewalk below.
Isn't wreckage a form of recklessness?

These blood-color petals
now grazing the tops
of my feet. Something's doleful
in her expression, standing with a pair
of dull garden shears, unable to answer
why we mistreat beauty. Watching her,
my tongue heaped with dirt.

Moments Larger Than Sleep

We fold into the same green
shadow forest that could

at any moment become riddled
with slanted sun.

Illusory slung—how do we
align ourselves with this collision

when we don't know what to feel
when the river rushes so clearly

though its color always fades.
Plagued by our stiff necks,

peering, we're born without
instinct against our misguided

rememberings that these swollen
riverbanks have nothing to do

with days already lived—how
in daylight we fight to disown

the truest landscape we'll ever know,
endangered by our own bodies,

not naked, but grieving
for an effortless fate.

Not Writing About the Storm

It's the soundless lightning that pulls my car,
the notion that light—all light, can distance
itself so brazenly from attached noise.
Not unlike the way an artist paints:
blending and layering against a too
colorless backdrop. The scene,
stifled, whole in its rendering,
though it never quite catches up
with the moment it lusts after. So, too,
struggles the thunder.
Everything around us has a captor.
We're all in pursuit.
A teeming river, a primrose.
The neatly paved road I drive
that waits for the bidding storm
to break. This is how we practice
patience. The clouds always
moving, long and away.

Grief Opens Slowly,

furtive in its possession over time.
I notice this most when I visit

my grandfather's house, fifteen years
a widower. He seems to live

in a state of distraction.
Unopened boxes of Russel Stover

chocolates. Loose photographs
waiting for albums. Thin and discolored

pillows that litter his bed. He makes
it look easy, this turning away.

My grandmother's presence doesn't
linger, not really. He practiced

giving her away. Bent over
her vanity, he threw out tubes

of pink lipstick after her
lobectomy, a look of quiet exertion

on his face. He emptied
her car of casino mugs—bleached

pale by the sun, and cashed
her remaining chips the day

of brain surgery. When she began
to struggle with memory,

he left her kiln for porcelain dolls
on the curb.

Still, I would almost believe
his consolation, but all I can see

is that bedroom shelf. My grandmother's urn—

green marble, the lid secured

with dusty scotch tape. It looks too full.
My grandfather so careful of its contents,

like a closet burying light, afraid
of her leaving twice.

Composition

The sun hung behind his head,
his features in momentary

shadow. At least I can remember
his mouth: an unsure line of white,

like soaked snow on a branch.
His blurred hand lifted at the waist,

a reach or push? How the camera felt
heavy in my hands, its lanyard wrapped

around my wrist. I could have insisted
the light was just right for the shot,

the sun, softened—hidden by clouds.
Who knew when we would again

visit this wintered hill with
its handmade fence. Could we ever

get back here to recreate
our steps? Fill ourselves back in the frame

of the tired fence. How we relied
on the wooden posts to stay

standing. Guide us to the footprints we left.
A stupid mistake: placing him in front

of the sun. What shot did I hope
to catch, when I knew

all that would show is his silhouette?
There is only a line I can't

remember tracing. Ignoring the hard light.
Here—in the dusky wash of his face,

this failure I courted but couldn't name.

The Violin Master

- Stradivari Museum

The man's fingers echo,
 knowing that without his
yearly touch, the instrument will
 lose its sound. How
 their song together translates
into a running out: strings
without the ability to lengthen,
 his palms in want
of another word for ceremony.

Strings vibrate, enunciating
 patterned scales
in a hopeless chase. A melody
 appears, slowly,
as if coaxing words
 that do not exist. Is this
 what they call seamless?

The exhale of the man's
 titled bow—rising again,
each note played out
 like fire kindling, a moment
 less than hesitance,
before another arrives.

He's caught in prayerful
 attachment, hands poised
 to again warm
the varnish, stir the salt-
 water wood—the wellspring
beneath the gut strung neck.

Memory of Winter, 1994

I only ever wished for snow once
when I woke early, stiff
from my bedroom's dawn-crisp air.

It was the longest New England
had gone without snow;

nearly five weeks
into the season and not a single
strand of spiral flakes.

Outside, the horizon begged
for snow, throbbing quietly
as it traded the sun for the moon.

I wished a plane would fly by, appear from behind
my neighbor's roof and sling through
the low, crowded clouds.

Cast an oval hole in its wake. The wings
stirring the snowflakes just enough,
until they spilled over.

Pine needles stretching at the sight.
The slate, uneven sky wanting it, too.

Why else would the roof creak,
shifting itself to face the wind?

To Solitude

You're sneaky. I can't find you
unless I'm trying. You require deliberate
disengagement from a day's clusterfuck.
You're a dinner of peanut butter and jelly
at the kitchen counter, that I enjoy more
than I should. Solitude, you're nothing
if not a ball-buster: a sheepish
one-night stand that leaves without
saying goodbye. And I never can
remember when I saw you last, not like
hassle or impatience, always cluttering
my desk, but rather that grand moment
of silence after my boyfriend
has stopped clipping his toenails so.

Hidden

There is a place where
I can hide. Not above the fleece
of clouds or beneath the dampened
dirt. Find me stolen away
in an evergreen tree, knit tightly
around its frame. I don't want
to be remembered in the air.
The sky is a pale, quick moving place.
I'll linger, here—between the soil
I've walked and the invisible rooftop
above me. The trees remind me how
to tremble and shake.
I know nothing of weight, naked,
like those burned to ash
after death. No tilled plots, too mortal
and bereaved. Say finality can be a tree.
Its broad leaves, always
falling in green.

Truro

"...the solitude was that of the ocean and the desert combined"

- Thoreau

We can never leave the sand scratched windows,
or the winter storms we'd watch from the porch, waves

seizing our yard. How we stood, with the front door
open, scarves pulled 'round our necks, blown tighter

with each oncoming squall. Lighthouse beams peeking
through mid-day, replaced a sun the clouds wouldn't

let us see. We always thought *this* will be the storm that
pulls away our stoop or chews off our shingled roof.

Our family would come looking for us, shipwrecked
in our own home, calling to us like fishing boats search

for the shore's edge: uneasy, momentarily blind.
They'd find us bare foot, our skin having too long

itched at the woolen socks we wear to keep warm,
teeth chattering the whippoorwill's song.

III

Grass

I want to do with you what fresh cut
grass does to bare feet: startle your skin

with my roughness, leave
a sun-slick dew along the edges

of your body. I want to lie
beneath you, flatten myself

to the shape of your weight,
& count the seconds until

you ask for my breath. I want
the sun to find a tree

to hide behind so we can
shut our eyes too—sharper

& less apologetic with our
limbs in the shade.

I want to know how long
you'll let sweat bead on your arm

before you can no longer
resist & shake loose.

Anniversary Party

Dad sends me to look for you, wondering
if you've seen his new bow-tie—

I find you naked, leaning over
a drawer of knotted pantyhose.

I stay by the threshold,
admiring your newest dress

that hangs in the door: floor-length
black velvet with satin emerald green bodice.

Soundless, I pull the dense
fabric through my fingers.

Even when I was child, you'd never
ushered me out while you dressed.

From another drawer, you pull
a pair of beige girdle panties;

the color darkening your nipples,
as if they were flush at the thought

they, too, must be hidden.
Those latex undergarments:

your aging vocabulary.

Your manicured nails dig
and snap at the taut elastic,

as the girdle needles its way
up your thighs.

In a beleaguered plié,
you try to coax the sheeny latex

up and over your downturned bottom.

Your stretch marks disappear. Your belly,
though outwardly held in, falls smooth.
The garment's nude hue
parcels your body from north to south,
your exposed skin—mottled,
like a porcelain doll left in a dusty corner.
I move to swing the door open, interrupt
your ritual, except I can't,
newly ashamed at the mirage I witness.
But you look contented, running your hands
over your new hourglass curves. Now,
your hips bear no marks of childbirth.
Only your breasts, still bare,
betray you with their flattened slopes.
You straighten, staring into the mirror.
And although along your waist, small beads
of perspiration stain the girdle,
you smile. Nearly finished
with your assembly: admiring the chasm
your body reflects because
acknowledging your flaws was never
something you were ever any good at.
Your truth, always more tolerable, when abstracted.

Same in Any Language

A smatter of rain desires
the dew it washes away,
while patched sun coaxes
nearby windows to take
a breath—a little heat
kept in them still, winter's
night sweat thinning.
And soon, the finch trading
beige for yellow plumage,
a spring so strong, it pulls
colors from his molt.

Saint Unmiraculous

- "Saints are not supposed to rest in peace; they're expected to keep busy: to perform miracles, to intercede."

from the story of St. Valentine

You bastard. A saint,
so lazy & unamused
by the prayers I send up,
the ones that knock against
your old & peeling rocking
chair. Where you sit, shirtless

& slouching, thrown
from sleep, nonplussed
by the pile of needs that fill
your lap. Not that you can
hear my measured verses,
your filthy ears, swollen

with dull yellow wax.
The unemployed saint
always has less to do.
I can tell you prefer to let
dirt crowd your fingernails,
search for the long strands

of gray hair in your beard.
Let *me* sweat it out.
No Comprendre, you say,
or *it's out of my hands*,
before shrugging, because
you're too busy

whittling the unmiraculous:
the cloud-banks you plump
for overcast days at the shore,
& the senseless scramble
of black & white fuzz
on the TV screen.

New Design

The familiar tightness when—
 just woken & damp
from the sweat

my shirt has trapped
 overnight,

 I bend to touch
my toes, begging
the tendons to unravel,

 flex, & lengthen,
anxious for the jagged pop

over bone that finally
 grants me motion.

The chorus of misused limbs

that I wait for, indulge,
 unable to let them rest:
 my body's uncomfortable beauty.

My hips no longer act
 as the joints
at the top of my legs, too busy

tying themselves in knots
 to let sleep happen
painlessly. No cure

for the staccato clicking
 in their sockets.

This choice is not about

finding room for rehearsing
static. I've always kept

 moving. Greeted by the warm
pressure, then ascending staircase

of cracks as my spine wakes
on a run. My left ankle's tempo—

tiny pinches & pulls—
the achilles tendon briefly
catching on the extra bone

interrupting muscle.
The new design
my joints have assembled,

always in error.
How even when barefoot
leaning over the bathroom sink,

I can't curl my eyelashes
without first popping
my ankles, willing my weight

to the balls of my feet.
Each snag, each moan,
each cramp a token

of the endless pliés
& practiced turn-out
I fought so hard to learn.

My own unnatural
doings, now, in a slow,

deliberate reversal. I'm listening.
I'll be the trespasser among

my own bones. But how do I
make my way back
to something I can hardly recognize?

Stiff & slowing,

the quiet tyranny of a vessel
that's looped its own tourniquet.

Beatrice to Dante

I was not wearing white
the way you might

describe to others, infatuated
with the myth I unravel

amongst our Florentine
streets. I don't want

to be your Erato, your curious
verses pursuing my wrists

and heels. A shrine built
to the unknown

is a fragile rendering.
The exaggerated sun

you say dusts my eyelashes.
How did I—mute and distracted,

look golden? I am
a woman losing her nerve

in the heat. And how rooftops
mistrust the wind, you will

soon feel me pulling you loose.

Epiphany, Unused

Pursued by a lifting blindness,
A kind of respite, the way you
so hollow, there's no way of
anymore. How long have you
Your eyes are silhouetted and
too fast, you'd rather chime
But you love this kind of decay,
your hands, folded to look like
polish what's buried, and return
you can no longer tell what was
you want nothing more than to

you teach yourself to lie again.
ignore the accumulation of your denial—
knowing if you can even be trusted
been trying to make yourself invisible?
hard to see. Like a clock wound
off beat, perpetually early and dishonest.
so you placate doubters with
truth, where you teach everyone how to
to a history so full of false landscape
inside you from the start—where
sweep yourself into dust.

Lament

Even after he was dead—
 nineteen weeks premature,
the nurses still
 posed baby S. for photographs
in the nursery, knit blue cap
trapping the last crests of warmth
 tangled in his black hair.
A keepsake for
 my bereaved cousin:

 draped, as if nursing,
in his mother's arms.



I collect & edit people's memories
 of my newly dead uncle—
the nostalgic moments friends
 & family e-mailed me.
 I reconstruct

their stories, render each
memory vaster,
 more doleful, as I edit
them by hand:

 “aging gracefully” swapped
for “growing old,”

the word “lifetime” omitted
 because it's too much like
reading a book backwards.

I try to find
 the least wordy route
of remembering.



How our bodies can give out—

like a lightbulb tripped too quickly,
no longer even human.

Is it the betrayal or
spontaneity we curse?

✱

Dementia can be a blessing. I'm told
my uncle had no real idea
he was dying, despite
the hospice nurse overnighting
in the spare bedroom.

I'm calling this bliss.

I can imagine my aunt
standing behind the door,
listening to his voice
crack & spittle,

I wonder what's wrong with baby,
he sings along with Nina Simone.

✱

Because the art of dying
privileges the weak, happens
without effort,

no necessary resolution
to the underpinned narrative,

the heart always the first
and last to go.

✱

I'm grateful,
that my aunt doesn't care
for poetry, she has other
ways of finding solace.

After each death, I waited
for someone to ask me
to come home.

No one ever said
I needed to be there.

Arson

I remember the train tracks caught fire first,
the soon-to-be spectators still asleep in bed.
The flames smelling of rusted chicory,

and the electric ashes, swallowed by
the forest's canopy. Nearby gambel oaks,
bent forward, both witness and accomplice

to the interrupted night's terror. Even my
standing still was premeditated: to destroy
something just to watch the way it falls

apart. I needed to see that giving over—
a slow collapse, where with every inch
of light the fire lent toward the steel beams,

the moon seemed to hang lower
over the smoldering treeline. Leaves gathered
closer, too, intoxicated, before exhaling

the same grayed and gritty smoke. How can I
do it, fill myself with obedience,
when the hairs on my arms rise like sparks?

Breath

Rounded arm and reach, a dancer's count
of three to full plié. So, too, a kite's uneven

gusto, blind

energy, bracketed by still clouds. Or lillium buds

accidentally dug free
by a labrador's snout.

Water molecules absorbed by lungs: snag,
fist, finally

dark purple; thus, the color of asphyxiate
bloom. Calm, achieved through

self-banishment.

It loosens here.

Pooled footsteps on a frozen pond
forging cracks after

the weight is gone. Just as

lips release a woman's breast. How
eyes returning to wake still fishline for night.

A white birch's bark stippled
with slats of black horizon.

As rain collected in a rusted spout
surveys the roof's edge. My mouth full

of prayers, silent thunder moving

toward heat. In a moment:
to shiver, to hold.